

# A Policy Proposal for Instant Runoff Elections with Ranked Choice Voting

Sponsored by Denver City Council Members

Darrell B. Watson (D-9) and Sarah Parady (At-Large)



# Who is supporting this proposal?

- Council Sponsors --- Parady and Watson
- Coalition Supporters (so far)
  - Common Cause Colorado
  - Colorado Black Women for Political Action
  - New Era
  - RCV for Colorado
  - Fair Vote
  - Veterans For All Voters
  - Colorado Working Families Party
  - Mi Familia Vota
  - Colorado Latino Leadership, Advocacy, & Research Organization (CLLARO)
  - League of Women Voters Colorado

# What is Ranked Choice Voting with Instant Runoffs?

- Ranked Choice Voting allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference (1st choice, 2nd choice, 3rd choice, etc.) instead of selecting just one.
- If no candidate gets more than 50% of the first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and those ballots count for their next ranked choice.
- This process repeats instantly in one election until one candidate has a majority and wins.

**In Denver, this proposal would apply to All Elected Positions for the City:**

- **Mayor**
- **District Council Offices**
- **At-Large Council Offices**
- **Clerk and Recorder**
- **Auditor**

# How Does It Work?

**Step 1:** All first choices are tallied. If a candidate receives more than half of the first choices, that candidate wins, just like in any other election.

**Step 2:** If there is no majority winner after counting first choices, the race is decided by an “instant runoff.”

**Step 3:** The candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and voters who picked that candidate as their top choice will have their next choice counted.

**Step 4:** The process continues until a majority winner (i.e., a candidate who wins with more than 50% of the vote) is determined.

## RANK YOUR *Sample!*

|          | 1st choice              | 2nd choice              | 3rd choice              | 4th choice              | 5th choice              |
|----------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| SAMPLE 1 | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| SAMPLE 2 | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| SAMPLE 3 | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| SAMPLE 4 | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |
| Write-in | <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> 3 | <input type="radio"/> 4 | <input type="radio"/> 5 |

### RANK EACH CANDIDATE IN ORDER OF PREFERENCE

Color in the ① next to your 1st choice, the ② next to your 2nd choice, and so on.

Fill one bubble per row, one bubble per column.

Don't rank a single candidate more than once.

Note: Ranking 2nd, 3rd, and later choices will not hurt your 1st choice.

# How Many Choices on a Ranked Choice Ballot?

## How many choices are allowed to rank?

- Discretionary policy decision to set the number of rankings (set to 5 in this proposal)
- Fixed number or tailored to the number of candidates who make the ballot
- More ranking slots give outside candidates a better shot at winning

## What do other jurisdictions do?:

- In San Francisco, voters now rank up to ten candidates, after starting with three rankings.
- In St. Paul/Minneapolis, voters rank up to three candidates
- In NYC, voters rank up to five candidates
- In Oakland, voters now rank up to five candidates, after starting with three rankings
- In Boulder, voters rank as many candidates as there are on the ballot

# What happens on election night?

## Election Night Reporting

- All first-choice votes are reported.
- In non-competitive races, the winner may be presumed on election night, although certification is a necessary step before a formal victory.

## Post-Election Reporting

- **Option 1:** Conduct round-by-round reporting on early results and update as ballots are received.
- **Option 2:** Wait to receive all ballots before conducting round-by-round counts.
- Finally, approximately 10 days after election night, all ballots will be received and tabulated.



# Benefits of Instant Runoffs with Ranked Choice Voting

- **Higher Turnout and Engagement:** Some RCV cities experienced a 17% higher turnout in municipal elections, as campaigns contacted more voters. ([Dowling et al., 2024](#))
- **Easy for Young Voters:** Young people vote more in RCV cities, driven by kinder campaigns and outreach. ([Juelich & Coll, 2021](#))
- **Saves Money:** The Denver Clerk and Recorder estimated Instant Runoffs with Ranked Choice Voting will save the City \$2 million by eliminating runoff elections.
- **Diverse Voter Turnout:** Voters of all races turn out as much or more under RCV than in non-RCV places. ([Dowling et al., 2024](#))





# Minneapolis & St. Paul, Minnesota

## Case Studies on Ranked Choice Voting

- RCV is directly responsible for the 9.6% turnout increase in the Mayoral elections in Minneapolis.
- Uptick in voter perception of positive campaigns, which further increases turnout.
- Successes in Diversity: 54% of the Council are women, and 62% are people of color.
- A 2017 Minneapolis survey found that 92% of voters found the new system easy to use.
- 84% of Minneapolis voters and 72% of St. Paul voters like RCV and want to continue using it.



St. Paul elected an all-female city council in 2023, representing a diverse set of backgrounds, as seen in the inauguration pictured above. (John Autey, Pioneer Press via AP)



# Additional Case Studies

**New York City, NY:** Nearly **1 million** ballots were cast in the [2021 mayoral primaries](#), the highest local turnout in decades. Increased turnout was a combination of a different system and community engagement.

- "I think what we saw at the polls was the result of a lot of successful community outreach and organizing to ensure voters were prepared as much as possible for this type of election under the ranked choice voting system." Lurie Daniel Foster, Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College

**Boulder, CO:** Ranked Choice voting was used for the first time in 2023 for the mayoral election.

**Maine:** Maine adopted ranked-choice voting (RCV) in 2016, applying it to statewide primaries and federal general elections. Maine voters have consistently expressed enthusiasm for RCV, with 82% of voters reporting that they found it simple to use.

# What are **risk-limiting audits** (RLA)?

- An RLA reviews a random sample of physical ballots to determine with a high degree of confidence that the election's reported outcome is correct.
- A “risk limit” is a set percentage that indicates the likelihood that the audit will identify an incorrect outcome during the audit.
- Colorado enacted RLAs in statute in 2009 and conducted the first statewide RLA in 2017, making it a relatively new tool.
- In Colorado, the SOS uses a software tool called "CORLA", where the risk limit is usually set at 3 percent, which means that if an audit is successful, there is at most a 3 percent chance that a wrong outcome would have gone undetected during the audit.
- If the audit reveals no discrepancies, the election is then certified by the canvass board. If differences are found, additional ballots must be audited.

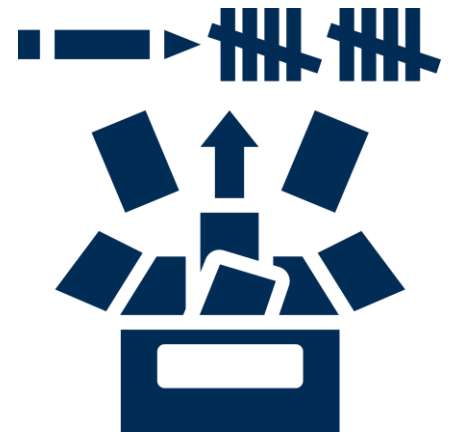
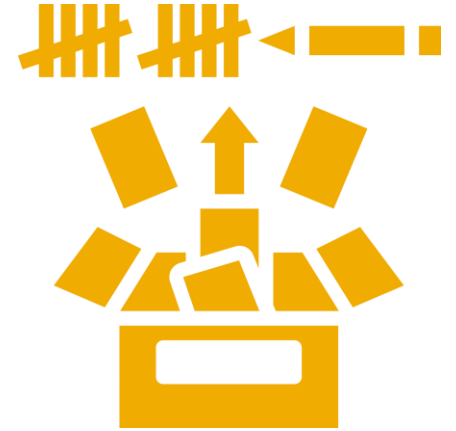
# What are risk-limiting audits (RLA)?

## RLA in Single-Winner Ranked Choice Elections:

- RLAs are now available for single-winner ranked-choice voting elections. These audits follow the same high standards as current elections but employ more complex mathematical methods for candidate eliminations.
- Colorado will pilot this RLA method in Fort Collins' ranked-choice voting election in November 2025 using the CORLA tool.

## RLA in Multi-Winner Ranked Choice Elections (At-Larges):

- RLA tools for multi-winner RCV are still in development because the math is more complex. There are two options for Denver.
- **Option 1:** Add a placeholder in the Charter to allow the Council to adopt At-Large RCV later, once audit tools are ready.
- **Option 2:** Move forward without requiring RLAs for At-Large races.



# Instant Runoffs with Ranked Choice Voting

## Increases Voter Turnout

- RCV cities see 17% higher turnout in municipal elections and more voters get contacted by campaigns ([Dowling et al., 2024](#)).
- Young people vote more in RCV cities, driven by kinder campaigns and extra outreach (Juelich & Coll, 2021).
- Voters of all races turn out as much or more under RCV than in non-RCV places ([Dowling et al., 2025](#)).
- After Minneapolis (2009) and St. Paul (2013) adopted RCV, turnout rose 10%, with the biggest jumps in poorer neighborhoods (McGinn, 2020).
- RCV general elections boost turnout by 10 points compared to old primary-runoff systems (Kimball & Anthony, 2016).
- In 2018, San Francisco's special RCV mayoral race drew more voters than the state's non-RCV primaries.
- Review of the six largest U.S. RCV cities shows clear turnout gains in RCV races over previous non-RCV contests.

# What is the impact on Candidates of Color?

**Largely Neutral-to-Positive:** While some jurisdictions report a neutral impact, evidence from comparable cities suggests that RCV elections lead to slight increases in the number of candidates of color and modest increases in victories by those candidates. E.g., Minneapolis, St. Paul, San Francisco, New York City.

**Clerk's Take:** The Clerk's office emphasized that elections measure the will of the voters and are not designed to steer elections toward particular winners. Ranked Choice Voting gives voters more options and increases voter participation, including among voters of color.

**Increase Language Access:** The Charter Amendment is projected to save \$2 million from instant-runoff elections. Council Sponsors hope this money will be invested in language access and justice programs.



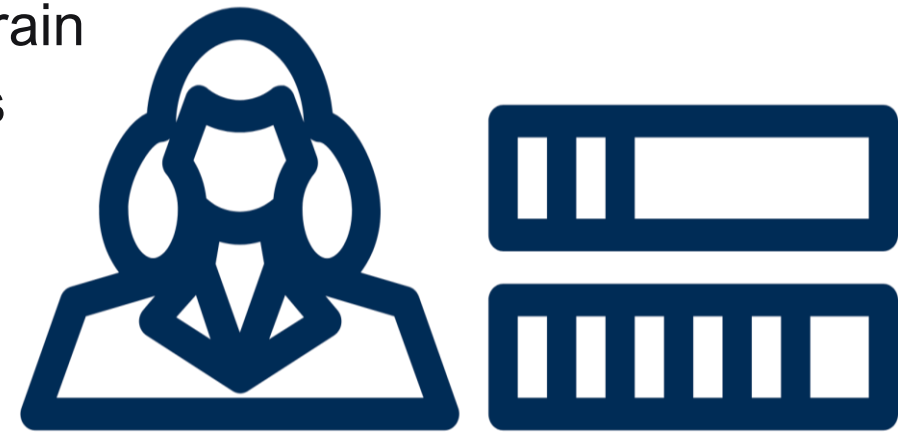
# What is the Implementation Timeline?

**Charter Amendment:** The City Council must pass the charter amendment by July 2025 to appear on the November 2025 ballot.

- Note: Delaying this proposal to the 2026 ballot will strain C&R's ability to administer, and it will give candidates little time to adjust for 2027.

**Citywide Vote:** Denverites will vote for the charter amendment in the November 2025 election.

**Implementation:** If adopted by Denver voters, Instant Runoffs with Ranked Choice Voting would begin in the 2027 municipal elections.



# Questions and Discussion

